Declassified and Approved For Release 2011/12/21 : CIA-RDP90-00965R000706950064-8

APPEARED
ON PAGE D13

WASHINGTON POST
16 May 1986

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Meet 'Spetsnaz,' Soviet Special Forces

They are the true mystery men of the Soviet Union, that riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. The few Kremlin officials who know about their existence refer to them by the name "Spetsnaz," or special purpose forces.

Needless to say, the Soviet man on the street knows exactly "nitchevo" about the Spetsnaz. He has read no tales of their derring-do in far-off lands; he knows none of their names, though some could be classified as Soviet heroes.

A secret Defense Department report explains why the Spetsnaz have been kept a deep secret:

"Considering these units as clandestine assets and being an integral part of their intelligence and security organization, the Soviets have kept these units out of public scrutiny to a far greater degree than their conventional forces.

"Glorious descriptions of their achievements in training exercises are never published [and] there is no distinctive uniform or insignia identifying them. Instead, the usual uniform is that of the airborne forces, or in the case of naval [Spetsnaz] simply the standard navy uniform."

Because of this, it has taken Western intelligence services years to form even the murkiest picture of Spetsalnaya Naznacheniya. What Western analysts have determined is that the Spetsnaz are used for special missions at the behest of Soviet intelligence and security services.

Whether these special agents report to the GRU (military intelligence), the Red Army or some other Soviet agency, U.S. intelligence experts have decided that the KGB retains ultimate control and responsibility, under direct supervision of the Soviet Central Committee.

In addition, though, the KGB has its own Spetsnaz people, the most notorious of whom are the professional killers of Department Eight of the KGB's First Chief Directorate. Department Eight "has been connected with assassinations, kidnapings, sabotage and other direct action operations for decades," according to one Defense Intelligence Agency expert.

There are also the KGB troops on the Soviet Union's borders, numbering at least 250,000, who could be classified as special forces. And while the Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency experts may haggle over the fine points, they agree that certain units under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which maintains Communist Party control, should count as Spetsnaz.

But the most dangerous Spetsnaz operatives are those who report to the Soviet military intelligence organization, which is the second-largest spy outfit in the world (second only to the KGB).

In each Spetsnaz brigade, the career officers "are the most highly trained individuals and are fluent in one or more foreign languages," the Pentagon report states, adding: "Their primary mission is reported to be the assassination of enemy leadership."

Each brigade includes three reconnaissance and destruction battalions of some 30 teams of 10 men each, plus signal, engineer and medical units. Naval Spetsnaz units, though smaller, include paratroops, frogmen and minisubmarine forces.

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